Turbans of the Indian Army

The turban, the traditional headdress of India, is often an object of confusion. As previously noted in our study of the Arabian headdress known as the keffiyeh, the two are often confused. And while they may have a shared origin, and both are made from cloth these two are very distinct.

Turbans can be found in South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, the Arabian Peninsula, North Africa, the Horn of Africa and parts of the Swahili Coast.

Throughout the Indian subcontinent for centuries the wearing of turbans has been common among Sikhs, who refer to it as a Dastar. In certain other faith communities, the headgear also served as a religious observance, including among Muslims, who regard turban-wearing as Sunnah Mu'akkadah (Confirmed Tradition).

In India the turban is referred to as a pagri, which also indicates that it is traditionally tied. There are several styles, and here is where the confusion really begins. In the Indian Army following the Indian Mutiny all Muslim and Sikh sepoys and sowars – infantry and cavalry respectively – wore a turban but the styles differed, while various Hindus also wore turbans, typically following the Muslim style.

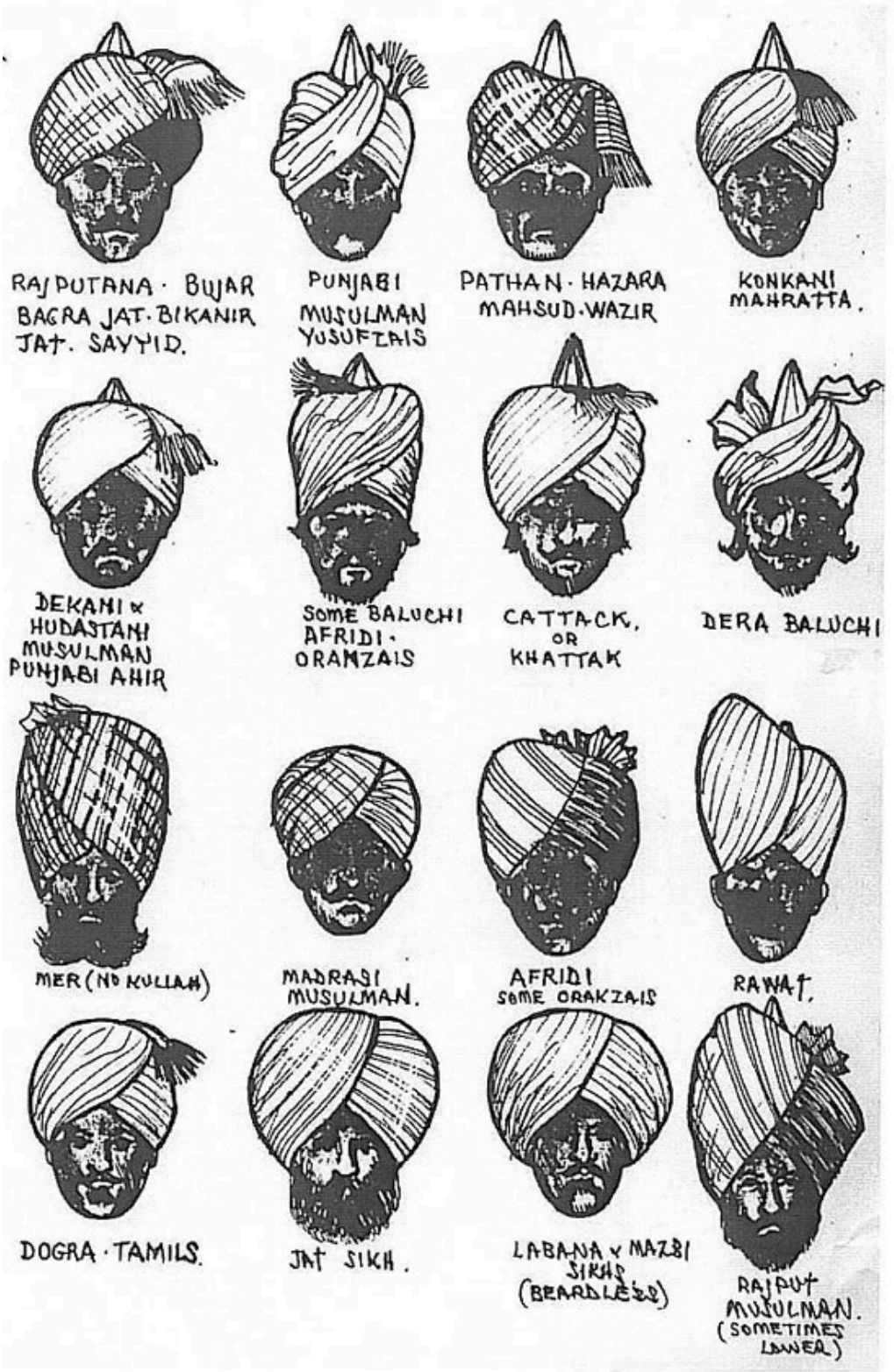
Generally there are about 12 key variations in the type of headdress that were worn by the Indian Army during the period of the British Raj.

Group	Headdress notes	Regiment/Class or Race composition
1	(a) Tall pugaree slightly Increasing in size -towards the top. Often with fringe ending on top. Kullah only slightly appears (b) Very slightly shorter but with prominent Kullah.	(a) Rajputana Mussalmans, Gujars, Bagri Jats, Rajputaner and Bikaner Jats. (b) Konkani Mahrattas.
2	Medium size pugaree slightly Increasing in size towards the top. Kullah only slightly appears. The fringe of Dekhani and Hindustani Mussalmans in Hyderabad Regts end in the front.	Dekhani Mussalmans, Hindustani Mussalmans, Dekhani Mahrattas, Ahirs of East Punjab.
3	Similar size to Serial 2, but straight-sided and with prominent Kullah.	Afridis, Orakzais
4	(a) Slightly smaller pugaree increasing in size towards the top. Prominent Kullah. Fringe ends usually on the left. (b) The same but with fringe usually ending on, top.	(a) Punjabi Mussalmans (b) Yusufzai
5	Similar to Serial 4, but pugaree tends to taper inwards towards the top.	Pathans, Hazaras, Khattaks, Baluchis, Brahuis, Mahsud Waziris.
6	Small round pugaree Increasing in size' towards the top. Sometimes with a tall.	Madrasi Mussalmans, Madrasi Christians (Britain's standard head)

B. Pugarees without kulla

7	Tall pugaree slightly Increasing in size towards the top,	Brahmans, Mers Merats
8	Medium size round pugaree, the size increasing considerably towards the top.	All Sikhs. In the Sikh Regts. of the old Bengal Army, especially the 15th and 45th, the standard of winding the pugaree was notably higher than the average
9	Medium sized round pugaree, the size increasing slightly towards the top. The fringe of the Hyderabad regiments ends in the front.	Punjab Hindus, Rajputana Hindus and Rajputs. The pugarees of Rajputs in the 2nd to 16th Regiments of the old Bengal Army tend to be taller than the average and sometimes are nearly as tall as Serial 7.
10	Medium size pugaree wound at a cross-angle making it higher on the left side.	Hindu Jats and Jats except those in Serial 1.
11	Small low crowned round pugaree	Dogras, Tamils, Pariahs and the Gurkha Company in the Guides Infantry Bn.
12	Pillbox hat	Gurkhas, Gurhwalis

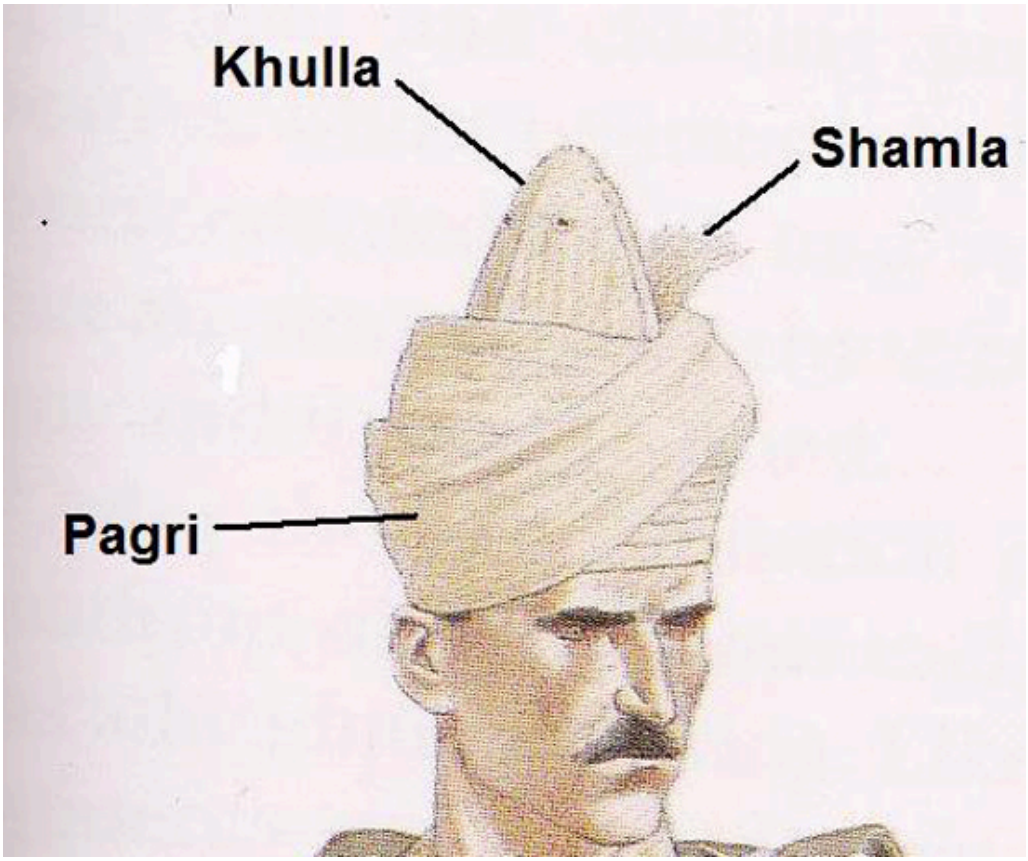
Additionally this pre-World War II illustration breaks down the various types of turban styles that were worn by the Indian Army:



Major R. Money Barnes wrote in his book *Military Uniforms of Britain & The Empire*, published by Seeley Service & Company (1960):

> "The winding of military puggarees had become a skilled accomplishment and, throughout the Indian Army, there must have been scores of different styles, each instantly recognizable by those who knew them. The variety of patterns in one regiment was due to the class-company system, which dated from after the mutiny of the Bengal Army in 1857."

What is notable is that even to those who didn't know a particular unit could easily tell a Muslim (Mussalmans in the period vernacular) from a Sikh. As noted in the table above, Muslims wore a Khulla (kulla) – a cone of sorts, which the turban's pagri was wrapped around. A shamla provided additional identification for the unit.



The original Khulla's were made of wicker or straw covered in cloth and were thus offered a reasonable hard type of cap. Into the 20th century these were produced solely in cloth, typically khaki, but versions in gray and blue can also be found.

Sikhs soldiers wore – and continue to wear – pagri that is wrapped around the head without a khulla. In both World War I and World War II it was common for these soldiers to forego wearing a steel helmet as a result.

Troopers of the Sikh Regiment in Europe as part of Operation Crusader

By the start of World War II typically only Sikhs continued the tradition of wearing turbans into combat, although turbans of various styles are used in both India and Pakistan today.

Gallery of Turban Development

A pre-World War I era turban to the 67 Punjabis – this khulla is reinforced with wicker

A 1941 dated khulla without the pagri

The British "Broad Arrow" stamp showing the date this khulla was produced or issued

A 1930s era unwrapped turban to the Governor General's department

A 1940 dated turban of the Punjab Police

An interwar Indian Army Air Force turban featuring a blue pagri

A World War II era turban to the Indian Air Force

A pre-World War II era Poona Horse Cavalry Turban for ceremonial occasions

A War War II era turban – unit unidentified

A Punjab Police dress turban of the style used today in Pakistan

Peter Suciu

This entry was posted in India, World War I, World War II and tagged Hindu, India, Indian Army, khulla, Muslim, pagri, Pakistan, shamla, Sikh on November 29, 2013 [http://www.militarysunhelmets.com/2013/turbans-of-the-indian-army] by Peter Suciu.

8 thoughts on “Turbans of the Indian Army”

irfan
August 12, 2016 at 6:34 pm

hi

I want to ask you if I can buy the hat kulla hat the goold one “Punjab Police dress turban of the style used today in Pakistan”

Safi'Ullah
February 6, 2018 at 9:40 pm

It can still be bought in various places in Pakistan. Though I’ve found that despite its similarity, it’s not of the same quality.
My great great grandfather, great grandfather and grandfather all wore this style of imama, or ‘kulle aala pagri’ and I still wear it today. I also use the white cloth, and the length I refer for it is a cloth that is 7 gaz.

Qaisar Rashid
December 14, 2016 at 3:30 pm

I remember my father used to wear one of these in late 50s and 60s. It resembled like one which the Punjab Police of Pakistan wears, but the Pugree or the cloth around the Kulla was white in color. One such Pagree was worn by Nawab Of Kalabagh, the then Governor of West Pakistan Malik Amir Muhammad Khan. I also remember that it was called ‘Patkha” and not Pagree.
To my understanding Pagree or Paggar was without the Kulla, the difference was in the size of the two. With Kulla and an erect cloth in front and another hanging on the back, fully starched,was known as PATKHA. Some one can correct me.

sustainable energy
December 18, 2018 at 7:14 am

There are two bright spots for all those considering homemade renewable power systems. Further, even when solar and wind generation increases at 10% year-over-year for the next

three decades just like the expansion of China, it still will not equal the volume of coal that individuals use. However even though many renewable power option is best suited for big scale generation, wind turbines have become successful when reduced with a size suited to home wind power and are creating a big contribution in your household's electricity requirements.

Wilfredo Buzzard
July 28, 2019 at 4:01 am

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Regards,
Buzzard

Rude69
April 1, 2020 at 7:38 pm

Hi there every one, here every person is sharing such know-how, therefore it's good to read this website, and I used to go to see this webpage all the time.

Mick Waddilove
July 28, 2020 at 9:55 am

Hi there, I'm trying to paint some indian figures for ww1 wargamers. Can anyone tell me if the shamla, and occasionally the khulla, would be in colours other than khaki in the field..?

Ethan Reiff
August 4, 2020 at 1:39 am

Mick,

The Indian Army of WWI is not my area of special expertise but my educated guess that if any WWI Indian infantry or cavalry did wear their full color turbans in place of the khaki version while in action on the Western Front or in East Africa or the Middle-East, they were a rare exception to the rule.

Comments are closed.